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NASA/MSFC/NSSTC Science Communication Roundtable

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Abstract. The Science Directorate at Marshall Space Flight Center (MSFC) conducts a diverse program of Internet-based science communication through a Science Roundtable process. The Roundtable includes active researchers, writers, NASA public relations staff, educators, and administrators. The Science@NASA award-winning family of Web sites features science, mathematics, and space news to inform, involve, and inspire students and the public about science. We describe here the process of producing stories, results from research to understand the science communication process, and we highlight each member of our Web family.

The Science Directorate of Marshall Space Flight Center (MSFC) sponsored the first of our family of websites, **Science@NASA (SNG)** in May, 1996. At that time, we instituted an experimental Science Communications (SciComm) Process involving scientists, managers, writers, editors, and web technical experts. The close connection between the scientists and the writers and editors has assured a high level of scientific accuracy in the finished product. In addition, members of the traditional outreach activities of NASA, including Media Relations and the Education Office, were involved in the process and have benefited by a close working relationship with the scientists. Currently, the SciComm Roundtable meets each week to review **SNG** activities. Before stories are published, the Roundtable, as well as the principals quoted in the story, perform a final review. The efficiency of the roundtable is such that the review process normally takes 2 to 3 days. Additional reviews by appropriate project or program personnel have been incorporated into the Roundtable process, with some increases in elapsed time to publication.

Since the debut of the initial **SNG** website, we have added several more, for a total of six sites in the family. The websites each have a unique character and are aimed at different audience segments (or report different aspects of NASA science). Three sites are aimed at an adult, science literate audience:

SNG, Spaceweather.com, and Ciencia@NASA. **Spaceweather.com** covers information about solar activity and its interaction with Earth's ionosphere and magnetosphere. **Ciencia@NASA** initiated in November, 2000, contains the Spanish version of SNG stories. Our most popular website, **Liftoff** to Space Exploration, is aimed at a high school audience. For the middle- or grade-school audience, we have **NASAKids**, which includes puzzles, news stories, topics covering NASA's enterprises, and the NASAKids Club. For educators and students interested in classroom exercises, **Thursday's Classroom**, features lesson plans and classroom activities centered around **SNG** stories. URLs for each of the websites are as follows: <http://science.nasa.gov>, <http://spaceweather.com>, <http://ciencia.nasa.gov>, <http://liftoff.msfc.nasa.gov>, <http://kids.msfc.nasa.gov>, <http://thursdaysclassroom.com>.

For the past five years, MSFC, the University of Florida School of Journalism and Communication, and Bishop Web works have collaborated to perform academic research to better understand how individuals accept and process scientific information, acquired through the internet. Results of a reader survey (delivered via e-mail to **SNG** subscribers) show that 96% of respondents performed some activity as a result of reading science stories on our website (e.g., observing a meteor shower, looking for aurorae, discussing science and NASA with their children). Other results are as follows: 85% of respondents rated the quality of articles as good to excellent, 28% of respondents were students, 19% of respondents were teachers, 80% of the teachers said they used our materials in their classrooms, 68% of respondents said they read our stories at home, 63% of respondents said they passed on information from our stories to family and friends, 31% of respondents were from outside the United States, 25% of respondents were female.

Based on the following data, we believe that we have been very successful in transmitting NASA science to the public. In 2001, we registered hits¹, visits², and subscribers as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Metrics of the Science@NASA Family of Websites

	Hits	Visits	Subscribers
Science (adult content)	111,000,000	11,900,000	173,000
Ciencia (Spanish, adult)	4,061,000	403,000	13,000
Liftoff (high school and adult)	340,000,000	30,240,000	58,500
NASAKids (K-middle school)	70,150,000	3,240,000	33,400
Thursday's Classroom (informal ed.)	5,500,000	770,000	175,000
Space Weather (focused adult)	106,700,000	7,314,000	182,300

¹ A hit is any file that is transferred. So, for a typical web page, you download the page (1 hit) and any images on the page (1 hit for each image). A page with frames takes a hit for the frame, and on hit for each frame window, plus all the images.

² A visit is defined as contiguous hits from the same IP address. A new visit would require a delay of 15 minutes between hits.